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Forum Südostasien / Forum South-East Asia

Community-Based Tourism in Thailand: (Dis-)Illusions of Authenticity and the Necessity for Dynamic Concepts of Culture and Power

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Introduction

Touristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experiences, and the tourist may believe that he is moving in this direction, but often it is very difficult to know for sure if the experience is in fact authentic. (MacCannell, 1999, p. 101)

Thailand is undoubtedly growing in popularity as a tourist destination and is advertised in multiple tourism brochures and travel guidebooks. Despite its exotic appeal, a large number of tourists decide to experience it from inside all-inclusive hotels and resorts with little contact with the local population. Nonetheless there are a growing number of individual travellers trying to discover the country's treasures off the beaten track, equipped with backpack and camera on the search for 'the untouched'. Research in tourism has shown that tourists increasingly demand 'authentic' experiences (Butcher, 2003, MacCannell, 1999, & Wang, 1999). Still, there is not only a shift in tourist expectations to a closer contact with locals, but also in terms of tourism development and planning (Mowforth & Munt, 2003). Neoliberal politics were at the forefront of an intrusion by multinational companies based in foreign, mostly developed, countries focusing on economic gain with high proportions of leakage and few

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benefits for local people (Potter, Binns, Smith, & Elliott, 2008). The dependency those companies and financing support of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) created is increasingly sought to be reduced in tourism politics and planning. Hence more alternative forms of tourism, such as 'pro-poor', 'sustainable', 'eco-' or 'community-based tourism' (CBT) are central to tourism planning, also because the negative economic, ecological, and socio-cultural impacts of conventional tourism are being realised (Archer, Cooper, & Ruhanen, 2005).

This article explores CBT as an alternative form of tourism in Thailand from a socio-cultural perspective. The intangible nature of cultural repercussions adds to the difficulty in attributing importance, which is why it is felt that not enough attention is being given to culture in tourism planning. A case study of a homestay programme the author participated in depicts both the tourists' desire for authenticity as well as their interaction with hosts. It is thus tried to not only identify socio-cultural impacts but to focus on a more holistic approach, bridging tourist expectations with the situation of hosts and investigating the concept of authenticity and power relations.

Front and Back Regions in the Host-Guest Encounter and CBT

The theoretical basis for this article is provided by the model of 'front' and 'back' regions, explained by MacCannell (1999) who adopts the concept of Goffman (1959). The front is herein made up of what is obviously presented to the tourist, whereas the back is the area of the locals' private lives. However, it has to be considered that "just having a back region generates the belief that there is something more than meets the eye" (MacCannell, 1999, p. 93). It is assumed that the back is the area of the authentic and untouched and is thus especially interesting for tourists as it embodies the 'real' life and not a simple 'show' (MacCannell, 1999). It is an honour to get admitted to the back and intimate zone as tourists "are motivated by a desire to see life as it is really lived, even to get in with the natives, and at the same time, they are . . . always failing to achieve these goals" (MacCannell, 1999, p. 94). He even argues that so-called 'false backs' deceive the tourist by pretending to grant access to the authentic, which in fact is not gained. The quest for authenticity is anchored in modernity, a process making the existence of authenticity in the West seemingly

impossible – mainly through technological progress (Taylor, 2001). This involves a production of self-identity, a motive which is common amongst tourists and which needs ‘the other’ to reassure one’s own identity (Galani-Moutafi, 2000). With the division into ‘self’ and ‘other’ the author is referring to Edward Said’s (1978) famous book *Orientalism* and post-colonial traces in tourism. Authenticity turns out to be essential for this piece of research as CBT and homestay programmes do involve a close contact with the host and a motivation of the tourist to discover the authentic and untouched.

According to Boonratana (2010) various definitions for CBT exist, however most of them exclude some of the aspects essential for its viability. He goes on and depicts the difficulties in defining CBT: It turns out that not all projects sold under the name of CBT are based on participation and there is a lack of awareness amongst tourists concerning the concept. Almost every type of tourism that is somehow connected to indigenous peoples is sold as community-based in Thailand. Boonratana (2010) finally defines CBT as

economically, environmentally, socially, and culturally responsible visitation to local/indigenous communities to enjoy and appreciate their cultural and natural heritage, whose tourism resources, products, and services are developed and managed with their active participation, and whose benefits from tourism, tangible or otherwise, are collectively enjoyed by the communities. (Boonratana, 2010, p. 286)

In defining CBT, culture also plays an essential role with “host communities retain[ing] a traditional way of life and culture that is of interest to tourists” (Boonratana, 2010, p. 284). It is thus a community asset used for the tourist product, which creates the assumption that cultural authenticity is awaiting the tourist throughout the stay in the community.

Homestay Programme in Ban Talae Nok

Participative observations were undertaken in February 2009 during a three-day homestay programme in Ban Talae Nok – a village situated in Ranong province, which belongs to the area severely affected by the Tsunami in 2004. The author undertook overt unstructured observations, noting any aspect that appeared to be essential for the research. This included activities undertaken by tourists and hosts, their commu-

nication, and above all interactions with each other. The observations are described as objectively as possible in order to avoid personal bias. However, it is still important to keep in mind that the experiences are applicable to those particular days and might differ depending on the participants or other influencing factors. Concerning the homestay, it can generally be defined as

room or space within the private homes of community members, offered to guests for a nominal fee, who expects to experience simple rural living or traditional lifestyles, and to interact and have cultural exchanges with the host family, therefore providing a meaningful learning experience for both host and visitors. (Boonratana, 2010, p. 288)

The CBT project was arranged by the organisation ‘Andaman Discoveries’ which is based in Phang-Nga province and the neighbouring province of Ranong. The organisation puts an emphasis on empowerment, training, and education, and seeks to actively involve villagers in their projects (Andaman Discoveries, n.d.) rather than seeing them as passive assets. Tourism is supporting the community financially, which gained special importance during the time after the Tsunami. Apparently, as locals were afraid of losing their traditions and culture to tourism, CBT was proposed – a more sustainable form of income that allows the generation of money without sacrificing locals’ culture and lifestyle (Andaman Discoveries, n.d.). Nevertheless, it is the Thai culture, traditions, and ways of living that serve as an attraction to tourists (Boonratana, 2010). The exotic obviously appeals to tourists and is used for marketing on their web site (www.andamandiscoveries.com) with phrases such as “discover traditional culture”, “interact and engage with people and environment”, “experience the real Thailand”, and “untouched Thailand”. Those slogans attract the authenticity-seeking tourist but might ring the alarm bells of anthropologists. It is questionable if those phrases are true or simply used for marketing purposes luring curious tourists to the area. Most importantly, advertisements, also for alternative forms of tourism, appeal to the tourists’ desire to find the authentic they themselves have already lost due to industrialisation and modernity (Taylor, 2001).

In order to gain a better understanding of the homestay in Ban Talae Nok, a description of activities for each of the three days is provided:

- **FIRST DAY:** On arrival at the office in Kuraburi tourists received a briefing on the organisation and major issues named in the pre-departure guide. The four

tourists and a translator were brought to Ban Talae Nok where they were shown their room, which was located in one of the houses of the village. This was followed by a tour through the village with the chance to ask questions. In the afternoon they participated in the so-called 'waste management', consisting of picking up garbage with local children. After some free time they had dinner, which was cooked and served by the host family.

- **SECOND DAY:** After breakfast the tourists had the opportunity to try producing typical Thai batik; in the afternoon they participated in mangrove restoration. They went on an excursion in the mangrove forest by longtail boat and planted trees where the Tsunami had caused severe devastation. The Thai massage session that followed offered the participants the opportunity to give massages to locals. For dinner they had a barbecue at the beach with some of the villagers before dressing up in Muslim clothes, which was called "cultural exchange".
- **THIRD DAY:** As the material for soap making was not available, the participants went fishing with some of the villagers. After lunch, the author left the village and went back to the office in Kuraburi for a feedback session.

Discussion of Findings

When it comes to interpreting the observations gained, there are various issues worth mentioning. First of all, the briefing beforehand turned out to be helpful insofar as it supported participants in providing knowledge and understanding of the people they were going to stay with. Also, the programme brought Thai traditions closer to the tourist and can indeed serve as a bridge between locals and tourists, and as a tool for bringing about understanding and respect. Nevertheless, upon a closer look at the interaction between hosts and guests, one gets the impression that not everything turns out to comply with the ideals of a perfectly sustainable homestay. The activities undertaken were often insufficiently explained and the visitors sometimes doubted their purpose. Mangrove restoration was in fact solely practiced by tourists as the villagers have not planted any trees for years (E. Rogers, personal communication, 18 February 2009). Despite the fact that the tourists were staying with Thai families, there was little interaction. This minimal direct contact is (besides language barriers) due to the fact that tourists were having meals on their own with locals

serving them. In the end it seemed to the guests that locals were doing their jobs – an impression, which somehow collides with the expectation of finding ‘the authentic’. Each encounter the tourists experienced seemed to be planned and part of an overall schedule. Still, the fact that tourists were part of the locals’ everyday life to a certain extent makes it hard to decide whether they actually gained access to the back – the ‘real’ area – or whether their experiences were part of staged activities – a simple job performed weekly. Cohen (1988) even argues that tourists are being deluded as to the authentic nature of their experiences, which are in fact staged events. If this were true, would this assumption mean anything negative for either the guest or the tourist? It should not be forgotten that the fact of presenting the front and a staged life could even help to keep traditions alive while maintaining privacy for local people (Stanton, 1989).

To understand socio-cultural aspects in tourism and intercultural communication it is crucial to move away from a simplistic ‘good versus bad’ judgement with its emphasis on the negative effects on ‘pristine’ cultures. Repercussions of tourism – such as the widely researched *demonstration effect* (that is hosts aspiring to tourists’ possessions and wealth), *acculturation* (that is one culture adopting parts of another, mostly more powerful culture) or *commoditisation* (that is culture being used as an economic good for consumption) (Holden, 2006) – should not be doubted. However, what is often overlooked is that culture is not static but dynamic as well as constantly evolving and developing (Burns, 2001). The fact that culture is sought to be preserved and kept ‘untouched’ (Taylor, 2001; Ivanovic, 2008) furthermore evokes the impression of superiority over ‘the savage’. Tourism for development seems to allow advancement, but only to a certain extent to prevent threats to the exotic and keep its appeal for tourists. This view restricts a culture from developing, a concept which is hard to achieve as globalisation and foreign influences might provoke cultural changes as well (van der Duim, Peters, & Wearing, 2005). Hence it would be wrong to criticise restricted access to the ‘back’ – if at all the division exists. Hosts do probably keep a distinction between work and private life, and are not aware of the existence of terms such as staged authenticity or commoditisation.

This critique does not try to condemn CBT due to its potential intrusion into private space and hegemonic motives of Western tourists wanting to experience ‘the other’. It is to be stressed that CBT does bring benefits for communities in less devel-

oped countries (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008). Central to this is involvement and teaching people to be active agents in shaping the tourist product and experience. The usage of local products helps to bring maximal profits to the area, a financial support that was above all needed after the Tsunami in 2004. CBT is indeed a beneficial form of tourism, given it is planned carefully and its implementation complies with the operational definition. Also, it leaves tourists with an extraordinary Thai experience, a precondition for mutual understanding and sensitisation. It even stages activities more subtle than conventional tourism does, which mostly satisfies the authenticity-seeking tourist (Maoz, 2006). Lastly the way CBT is organised can help strengthen culture and traditions through fostering respect (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008).

It would be essential, though, to also consider the viewpoint of the host. Ultimately – from a socio-cultural perspective – it is most important to ensure that people in the areas visited do still feel like human beings and not like part of a human zoo. This is where CBT can make its contribution by ensuring equal meeting grounds for people without a voyeuristic approach by tourists. Probably the most important task is to eliminate feelings of superiority and hegemony with one culture being superior to the other (van der Duim, Peters, & Wearing, 2005). It is necessary to ensure a more equal distribution of power, which is omnipresent on various levels in tourism and constantly changing (cf. Cheong & Miller, 2000, who are investigating power according to Foucault's ideas). This also involves asking who ultimately has the power to decide what is authentic (Taylor, 2001) and having a close look at what participation really means in CBT (Mowforth & Munt, 2003). It has even been found that the usage of culture in tourism by communities has the potential for their empowerment (Cole, 2007).

It is extremely difficult to balance power asymmetries in communication and human encounters due to the nature of tourism *per se*. Tourists as such are trying to escape everyday life (Burns, 1999), to get away from Westernised culture and homogeneity and increasingly look for the exotic and pristine, which is – for them – rarely to be found in the industrialised world. There is a search for meaning and values (Reid, 2003), which in turn connects to the striving for authenticity, leading back to suppression as “the whole notion of authenticity . . . comes to us constructed by hegemonic voices” (Spivak & Gunew, 1993, p. 195). Still, communication can help to return the gaze (Taylor, 2001) and make locals as well as tourists learn from each

other without feelings of suppression or superiority (van der Duim, Peters, & Wearing, 2005). Through examinations of power it is increasingly realised that a 'local gaze' does exist as well and includes staging events as a response to tourists' power (Maoz, 2006).

Conclusion

The intention of this article was to depict the concept of authenticity and cultural preservation in CBT in Thailand. Using the example of a homestay case study in Ban Talae Nok the concept of 'authenticity' and the division into 'self' and 'other' were critically investigated. The basis is formed by tourists' motivation to participate in CBT stemming from the desire to experience the exotic and authentic, which is supposed to be found in the back area of communities. Despite the economic gains CBT brings and the respectful way that tourists deal with hosts, the impression of hegemony in interactions is still existent. There is a division between 'I' and 'the others' and power levels seem to be uneven. Most importantly, tourists should not be disappointed if their experiences are not a hundred percent authentic, as it cannot be assumed that all tourists are accepted and treated as part of the family. Also the language barrier and the tour guide who plays a major role between the two groups will always reduce interaction.

It was also found that the utmost challenge is not necessarily cultural preservation, but a shift to a more symmetric power distribution. Hence staging authenticity and making tourists believe that the front is actually the back region they desperately try to enter might be a justified way to attribute more power to hosts and make the tourist experience a more equal one. CBT does involve power from below (van der Duim, Peters, & Wearing, 2005), which is certainly one step into the right direction. However, it is – in addition to that – necessary to ensure a cultural approach stemming from below as well. It is mostly self-evident in tourism planning to preserve culture and authenticity – as it is also shown by the definition of CBT – although it is not sure that hosts indeed share this viewpoint (Trupp & Trupp, 2009). Hence it is crucial to reinvent the role of culture in tourism planning – a concept that needs to be regarded as dynamic and based on power relations – to make community-based tourism a blessing for hosts and an enriching experience for tourists, even if accompanied by some degree of authentic disillusion.

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